

M-learning in Hospitality: An Exploration of Older Workers' Needs and Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

People have various learning styles, and therefore the hospitality industry should consider generational differences in learning as it seeks to develop human capital by revitalizing its training program. Mobile learning (M-learning) is increasingly becoming popular as a training tool in the hospitality industry. As members of the baby boom generation - people born between 1943 and 1960, the proportion of workers over 55 years old will increase dramatically. As this population grows, training should be modified according to the different generational characteristics of employees, their respective expectations, attitudes, and level of satisfaction in current work environment. Consequently, this study intends to explore older workers' perspectives of M-learning use in the hospitality workplace. A case study approach is proposed as the main methodology for this study.

Keywords: *M-learning, Training, Older workers*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, technology development has rapidly grown and has expanded its sphere to include the utilization of mobile devices for distance learning, which is becoming popular in organizations (Parson, 2010; as cited in Higher Education Statistic Agency, 2007). Due to the popularity of mobile devices, M-learning imparts a new training instrument by helping employees to acquire knowledge and skill in ubiquitous ways with the support of mobile technology. Accordingly, although the economy in the United States has been on the decline, parts of businesses are continuously pursuing highly developed training strategies to counter any further negative economic impact.

M-learning has promptly emerged as an educational application in terms of its advantage of favorable factors such as features, price, and user friendliness (Squire, 2009). M-learning is "a form of e-learning that specifically employs wireless communications devices to deliver content and learning support" (Muyinda, 2007; as cited in Brown, 2005). However, some factors of mobile devices are feeble in that it is fragile when dropped, has cumbersome input mechanisms, and a tiny screen (Squire, 2009). Although Mobile devices have some negative factors, it is a handheld computer which easily provides accessible learning resources anywhere and anytime.

Hence, it is worthwhile to explore how M-learning affects training programs in the hospitality industry.

The proposed research study will attempt to address a number of issues highlighted in the relevant literature. How do hospitality employees utilize mobile devices for learning effectively? How does the hospitality industry design an effective training program for mobile media learning environments? Since the hospitality workplace includes representatives of several generations, how is the use of M-learning as a training tool perceived across these generations? Do generational differences matter when implementing M-learning based training strategies? These questions have helped shape the direction of this proposed research study and the authors will reveal the main focus and study purpose after a brief background review of generational differences in the hospitality workplace.

Older workers have a wide range of skills based, in part, on their experience that could prove extremely beneficial to the organization. In addition, older workers could serve as mentors to others, exhibit better consumer relations with customers, and implement a wide range of skills from their experiences that would help organizations (Rothwell, Sterns, Spokus, & Reaser, 2008). Accordingly, organizations should promote additional training for older workers, which in turn, may produce even better returns on the training investment. Since M-learning is now considered as a training tool across the service industries, the number of aging workers exposed to this tool would likely increase in the hospitality industry as well. Thus, it is quite timely to discuss how M-learning impacts older workers in the hospitality industry.

This study explores older workers' perspectives of M-learning use in the hospitality workplace. Furthermore, it seeks to examine the current issues of M-learning use as a training tool. The research study aims to:

1. Discover which M-learning based training programs older workers access for their learning.
2. Identify perceived training design needs for M-learning used by older workers in the hospitality workforce.

M-learning is still in the infancy of its research. This study aims to add to the body of knowledge about M-learning, particularly as it relates to an examination of how older workers can develop their self-career management in hospitality industry.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The aging workforce

The number of the U.S. workforce aging population between 1977 and 2007, namely workers who are 65 and over increased to 101 percent while the employment of workers aged 16 and over has shown an increase of 59 percent for total employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). Consequently, training should be modified according to the different generational characteristics of employees, their respective expectations, attitudes, and level of satisfaction in current work environment (Rothwell, Sterns, Spokus, & Reaser, 2008). According to Rothwell, Sterns, Spokus, and Reaser, when older workers encounter competitive situations on a given job, they generally have higher motivation, and they can rely on their more qualified experiences, job flexibility, and managerial support (2008). Therefore, older workers can develop their

professional career in their current situations by providing different training which is designed for approaching different individuals.

Training modification for older workers with M-learning

The field of M-learning is in its initial stages and is attracting considerable research (Muyinda, 2007; as cited in Woukeu et al., 2005). Many organizations are attempting to utilize M-learning as part their training due to its perceived benefits. Although organizations offer training for M-learning to enhance their knowledge and skills, older workers might not access this learning systems because many older workers barely participate in learning and training opportunity (Rothwell, Sterns, Spokus, & Reaser, 2008). Thus, training for needs assessment of M-learning should be established to facilitate the learning styles of older workers.

A Conceptual Framework for Adult Learning

Since some older workers are not tech savvy, training programs based on technology may seem to make it work to them. Therefore, development of training program utilizing technology should be appropriated for older workers. The adult learning theory can be used in the design of technology-based training programs to make it more effective. Especially, when this theory is integrated into the design of M-learning environments, it could create effective training that not only assists the needs of older workers to use modern mobile devices but also apply to their requirements as an adult learner. Therefore, Andragogy adult learning theory may help develop training programs which are an applicable M-learning environment for older workers.

The need to know

Adults need to know why they should learn something because they would like to apply to their lives. Hence, this conceptual model will help adult learners the value of training programs, either online or classroom setting, to reflect on what they expect to learn and how they can utilize M-learning in the workforce. Accordingly, the design of training program plays a significant role in M-learning, for the relevance of the ongoing learning process.

The older workers self-concept

M-learning can be fostered their learning path if adult learners could learn the deeper and psychological need to be self-directing (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). The ability of initiatives of M-learning can be allowed older workers to follow learning direction that most appropriately reflects their need to learn. Therefore, M-learning will become important for the older workers to use all of the capabilities of the technology which can assist older workers to develop self-directed learning style.

The role of the older workers' experiences

Adults' experience is of little worth as a source for learning (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005). These make older workers provide an additional base of knowledge that can be used in M-learning when trainers design a program. The design of training of M-learning should include opportunities for older workers to use their knowledge and experience.

Readiness to learn

Readiness to learn is important for adult learners to be able to do in order to deal with their real-life situations (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005). These should be adapted for training program and also involve their requests for older workers' expectations. In addition, organizations can encourage older workers to apply training program of M-learning to acquire knowledge and skills. As technology continue to provide improved learning prospect and flexibility in the manner in which information is communicated and assessed effectively, M-learning should be considered as training tools.

Orientation to learning

Adult learners are "life-centered in their orientation to learning" (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005). Adult learners want to see how their learning will apply to their life so that technology-based training program should be reflected their example of real-life situations on their job. Accordingly, if older workers can modify real-life examples in M-learning, it will help them to learn efficiently and can employ them to better on their job.

Motivation

According to Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, adults are receptive to some external motivators, but the most powerful motivators are internal pressures (2005). Hence, motivation such as the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem and quality of life are important in giving adults a reason to learn (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005). As a result, a training program that builds older workers' self-esteem may help motivate completion of a longer lesson for M-learning.

METHODOLOGY

A purpose of this study is to discover what kind of training program of M-learning will be appropriate for older workers, unearth what training strategy of M-learning will be required, and determine how both older workers and trainers will combine with training program utilizing mobile devices. A case study approach is proposed as the main methodology for this study.

Typically, qualitative research in some respects encompasses a myriad of approaches to research that are different from one another (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). A case study is defined as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life phenomenon profoundly, but when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009). The qualitative approach utilized in this study could provide an effective framework for examining characteristics of the respective M-learning.

The focus of the study will be older workers in a major hospitality organization. The authors of the paper are provided with access to over 40 employees in this organization. Employees who are using M-learning tools within the company will be invited to participate in focus group studies. Individuals who participate in the focus groups and meet the criteria for the study will then be invited for unstructured interviews. Transcripts will be analyzed to deduce 'the big picture' in terms of the outlined research questions and objectives.

POTENTIAL RESEARCH IMPLICATION

The growth of M-learning has underscored the need for a better understanding of training design in hospitality industry. Since technology continues to provide improved learning possibilities, M-learning should be considered as a training tool in the hospitality industry. Currently, the proportion of workers over 55 years old will increase dramatically. As this population is increasing, training should be modified by their expectations, attitudes, and satisfaction. However, insufficient empirical research has been done to test M-learning principles involved. Since new technologies and devices have become available for M-learning, theory and methods will be required to assist both older workers and trainers.

The case study for older workers in this paper will allow for a better understanding of the benefits derived from M-learning training and the older workers' learning styles. In terms of case study, this paper will be developed to enhance understanding of older workers and facilitate the successful implementation of M-learning. As a result, the next step is to empirically investigate the relative value of M-learning to the overall success for older workers' learning. Additionally, the next research of M-learning should explore different learning style based on technical generational gap.

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